

T E N N E S S E E F O L K L O R E S O C I E T Y

B U L L E T I N

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VOL. IV

December, 1938

NUMBER 4

FINDING FOLK DANCES IN TENNESSEE

While my wife and I were engaged in the delightful pastime of searching in our memory for religious folk-song, it was very natural that other bits of folk music should come to the surface: old love songs; old ballads; old fiddle tunes; and, over and over, the old Play-Party Songs. After a time we began to reflect that these old Play-Party Songs constituted a body of folk lore quite as large as the old white spirituals which we were then collecting and getting ready for publication. Still later it began to dawn upon us that these things were really folk dances; distinctive American folk dances, too; though we had been accustomed to think that America was young and too cosmopolitan to have any folk dances of her own. When we had heard the term "folk dances" used in any discussion, it had always meant the dances of Old World peoples, many of which dances had been brought to America by visitors, by books, and by immigrants, who have been coming in a varying but unending stream for three hundred years.

It is often said that our country is a "melting pot" which fuses all these alien races into a common type of American citizen. How much in error is this idea is now apparent, as alien groups and alien ideas threaten, not only our social and economic order, but the very existence of our nation.

In such a polyglot population it would seem to be vain to look for any really American folk music or folk dances. But all of America is not thus. In our southern hills there are wide areas into which no foreigners have ever come; where almost every person is a direct and pure-blooded descendant of the English and Scotch-Irish folk who came here at the time of the American Revolution. These people, found mainly in Tennessee and Kentucky, lived here for more than a hundred years before they were touched by the amazing economic and social progress of other sections of America. Thus they had time to develop distinctive and genuinely American customs and cultures, not found in any other part of our country, except as carried there from these hills. Among these customs were none more interesting than the old Play-Party and the old Play-Party Games.

That these unique folk dances have escaped recognition, seems to be the result of a number of circumstances.

First: They were never called dances. The austere religious tradition of our southern mountains banned all forms of the dance, as essentially of the devil. The young people, whose youthful spirits found joyous release in the rhythmic group song, were forced to keep the steps and the action within such limits that the word "dance" would not apply. Therefore, although they were dances, the fact has so long been denied expression that it is, to most people, a new idea.

Second: They were not found to any great extent in the more populous industrial regions of the North and East, where a

shifting cosmopolitan population prevented their development, but where alone they would have had opportunity to be recognized in literature. They developed in the static civilization of the hills, and disappeared when the industrial revolution finally reached their territory.

Third: The more learned people of their own territory, taught in the literature and customs of the North and East, rejected these games as crude and useless and smacking of evil. They were never recognized by our institutions of learning nor accepted into the society of the more cultured people, who scorned them as the coarse play of the ignorant. This supercilious attitude still prevails, taking the form of mockery and burlesque whenever a "hill-billy" tune or a selection of "mountain music" is offered.

For these and other reasons, the Play-Party Games were never incorporated into the literature and social customs of educated America, and when our industrial progress finally brought the culture of the city into these more remote places, the Play-Party perished, perhaps forever.

From the foregoing discussion we are prepared to find that very little has been written about these old group dances. The first reliable book upon the subject appears to be The Play-Party in Indiana, by Leah Jackson Wolford, published by the Indiana Historical Commission in 1916. Mrs. Wolford's material was gathered in Ripley County, Indiana, just across the Ohio River from the Kentucky hills. Of the fifty-eight titles in this book, some of which are

old songs bearing no relation to the dances, several of which have no tunes written; and many of which have playing-directions too meager to follow; we are able to find less than a dozen which can positively be identified with those of middle Tennessee, though similarities in a considerable number of them are such as to suggest derivation by repeated variation. It is needless to state to a group of students of folklore that not one of them is exactly identical with those of Tennessee.

Since the publication of that book, until recently no other authentic book upon the subject has appeared. In 1936 the Tardy Publishing Company of Dallas brought out a volume called Swing and Turn, written by William A. Owens and dealing with the Play-Party games of Texas. These games, a number of which are variants of each other, show greater similarity to those which my wife and I remember from our own youth than do those of the Indiana book; though still never exactly the same. The closer similarity is easily explainable by the fact that large parts of Texas were settled directly from middle Tennessee.

The same thing is true of Oklahoma, whose Play-Party games are given publication in a book released just this year by the University of Nebraska; The American Play-Party Song, by Dr. Benjamin Botkin, of the University of Oklahoma. This is a very scholarly work; the product of extensive research, and featured by exhaustive references. It contains fewer tunes, however, in comparison with the mass of words, than do either of the others names, and its descriptions and playing-directions are not sufficient to give much idea of the dance figures. The

emphasis is so completely upon the words that the other elements are largely lost, and Dr. Botkin includes many : songs and rhymes that have little or no relation to the Play-Party Games.

So far as we know there has been little effort made to collect and compare tunes and dance figures, the two things which with the words make up the old Play-Party Games. Since all three things were essential, it is as necessary to examine the music and the action as it is to find the words, if we are to get any true picture of our ancestral dances. For instance, we find two collections of singing games copying exactly the music of Elizabeth Burchenal for "Old Dan Tucker". Miss Burchenal includes this as a country dance, and gives dance calls and instrumental music with it, but no song. As we knew it along the Caney Fork years ago, there was no instrumental music and no calls; the song supplied both.

In the same manner the collectors have confused the tune of "Old Betsy Lina" with "Ten Little Indians", though the tunes as we know them while similar are quite distinct. This is not to say that these collectors did not correctly report the tunes they found, for variation is always found in this material, but their easy identification of the tune with some existing written music and their failure to give as many variants of the tunes as they do of the words is at least an indication that more work is needed in finding tunes.

In these old dances there was no emphasis upon steps, posture, nor position. A simple walking step, with an occasional tap of the foot as it moved over the floor, sufficed for every game; though the rhythm was often perfect. The high-stepping, kicking, bending, and swaying of the modern dances were all unknown. The dancing position was likewise simple. Hand-in-hand or arm-in-arm, the partners made all the swings and turns and promenades. The man never placed his arm around the girl nor his hand upon her person, except to take her hand or her arm. The close bodily contact practised in the dances now, would have disgraced our grandmothers for life. In middle Tennessee, the man was always on the right of his partner in the old Play-Party Games, though this was reversed in what was called regular dancing, with fiddle and called set.

These old games were essentially group dances, and the principal idea was the pattern of the group movement; a set of figures through which the whole group moved in time to the words and music of the song; all the changes being timed by the words. There was no instrumental music: every change of partners; every swing and turn; every action was upon a certain word or syllable. There was also a dramatic element, the pattern representing some life situation, more or less apparent. Often, also, there was a game or contest embodied in the dance, the object usually being the securing of a partner.

My wife and I have found here in the valley of the Caney Fork River some form of nearly all the games listed by any

writer which we have consulted, taking into account the resemblances mentioned above. So many of them, however, are closely related variants of each other, that we have recorded a smaller number than some other collectors. I have attempted to write the melodies as I remember them, and as my wife remembers them, checking these memories with those of as many older people as possible. I have not been satisfied with any single version, but have examined every possible source. It is very difficult to judge between the conflicting memories, but we have worked hard to get the common tradition, and have many witnesses. We have included careful playing directions, with diagrams where they seemed useful.

To the collection of these old dances there are many and serious obstacles: the most serious being the failing memory of the aged people who alone can remember them. Many of the words and the tunes and the figures are completely forgotten, and others are mixed in almost hopeless confusion in the minds of those who have not thought of them for years together. It is a rare exception to find a person who can remember all three elements - words, music, and action - of a single game in right form and relation. When we consider that all three of these elements varied from time to time and from place to place, and indeed at the slightest whim of any participant; the task of bringing order out of the chaotic reports seems hopeless. And truly

it is hopeless for any but a native of those favored localities where these dances have persisted until recent years. An investigator from another section might find the words of many of them, and might sort them out into a fair approximation of their actual use. He would have much more trouble with the action; so easy to confuse in the memory and so hard to describe; as witness the failure of the few who have reported, to discover that the man was on the right, though any old person who actually participated will tell you so, that is, in the section we have investigated.

But it is the tune that offers greatest difficulty! Indeed we moderns can not even hear the old melodies. To our ears, attuned to the major mode, and listening always for the accustomed chords, these strange old tunes of ancient tone families make no appeal. With pulses set to the swing of modern rhythms we can not appreciate the simple marching measures of the old music. Yet, if we could get away from the radio and the piano and the other noisy music of every day, and listen to someone who could really sing them, we should discover in these old folksongs a sweetness never suspected; innocent of harmony, and depending solely upon a rhythmic succession of cadences repeated until their every tone is anticipated in the soul of the hearer.

In spite of all their vicissitudes: forgotten because unwritten; overlaid and changed by modern music; forced by the piano and the fretted strings to conform to the favored scale; twisted to fit chords for which they were never intended;

yet does their beauty persist, to haunt the souls of our musically minded, who find the song of some old mountaineer irresistibly enchanting.

Dimly recognizing our loss, many modern musicians are trying to find and play our so-called mountain music, but they seldom catch the spirit of the fragments they discover. I am filled with gratitude to Mr. Bryan¹, who has built a beautiful symphony around some of the old folk tunes. This is in happy contrast to those who poke fun at the "hill-billies", mutilate the old songs, and burlesque them in the coarsest manner. This mockery and ridicule is an attitude that we who love our folk music should resist with all our power. For them to thus hold our mountain people up to ridicule should arouse all the fighting blood for which we are as a people famous. We should not allow our Tennessee folk songs; the purest American music, produced by the purest strain of Americans; to be thus degraded to a source of contemptuous laughter by a heedless mob. Instead, we should redouble our efforts to find the folk songs and folk dances of our Tennessee ancestors before they are "discovered" by those who can not understand nor appreciate them. We need more sympathetic workers among these hills, more seekers among our own people, who will patiently collect and compare until our treasury of folk lore is complete.

And why are we so anxious to find and preserve these

1. Mr. Charles F. Bryan, Director of Music at Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, Cookeville, Tennessee

fading traditions? Why should we take such pains to save these lost melodies and forgotten phrases? Because they are the raw material of romance, the background of literary beauty, and the deep roots of music and art. On the lore of a people are all their richest achievements built. If ever Tennessee has a great poet or a great composer, he will be one whose memory is filled with Tennessee folklore.

In our schools we teach as literature "The Lady of The Lake"; a poem of such heart-stirring loveliness that thousands of people have journeyed halfway around the world to see the hills whose legends and songs have found in it their culmination. Sir Walter Scott was a native of those hills, and their folklore filled his heart and soul, though his neighbors of the Scotch highlands had never seen in their homely traditions a song and a story that would move the world. The song and the story were there, but until Scott, the great heart of humanity had never heard the mystic music of the Harp of The North.

Our Tennessee highlands are as beautiful as those of Scotland, inhabited by the same race, and as rich in song and story, though still without an interpreter. Let us believe that the time will come when, under the touch of a master, the legends and the folk music of these hills will be woven into a pattern of eternal beauty, which shall thrill the hearts of men throughout the ages, and shall prove that our people are what a prejudiced witness already believes: God's finest folk.

L. L. McDowell

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H. S.

TENNESSEE FOLKLORE SOCIETY BULLETIN

Volume IV

Number 4

December, 1938

Published four times a year by the Tennessee Folklore Society

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The Leading Article

The leading article in this issue of the Bulletin is in the way of a preface to the Folk Dances of Tennessee just published by Mr. and Mrs. L. L. McDowell. We are glad to give place to this article for its own sake, for it is a valuable statement as to the nature and vogue of the Play-Party Game or Dance and is also an interesting account of the collectors method.

But we are even more particularly glad to present this article as a practical way of calling attention to the new McDowell book. Some two years ago Mr. McDowell brought out his Songs of the Old Camp Ground, a careful and extensive record of collecting and recording in the field of the religious folk song of the valley of the Caney Fork River.

This more recent book takes its material from the same isolated valley in Middle Tennessee. The record includes words and music of the songs and a complete description of the steps and action for each dance. Many diagrams are given as further aid to the reproduction of the dances.

Among the games or dances included are: "Mr. Boatlander", "Shoot the Buffalo", "Swing on the Corner", "Jump Josie", "Weevily Wheat", "Yonder She Comes", "Old Betsy Lina", "Long Summer Day", "Poor Old Chimney Sweeper", "Alabama Girl", "Five Tinkers", and many others.

Southeastern Folklore Society Meeting

The Southeastern Folklore Society meets in Tennessee in April, 1939. The meeting will be held in Knoxville at the University of Tennessee, on Friday and Saturday, April 7 and 8. This meeting will bring to Tennessee a number of the leading figures in folklore study in this section and in the entire country and will offer a program of high value.

We hope to be able to print at least a sketch of the program of this meeting in our next issue, but we note it here now, in the hope that many of our members will plan to include it in their spring schedule.

List of Members

The Editor hopes there will be some value in printing once each year a list of the members of the Society. We are listing here those who have paid dues for 1939 and also those who paid dues in 1938. Members are urged to report to us changes of address.

Anderson, Geneva -- Maryville
 Bass, William W. -- Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City
 Berry, U. S. Senator George -- Washington, D. C.
 Best, Edwin J. -- TVA, Knoxville
 Boggs, Ralph S. -- Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
 North Carolina
 Boyd, W. B. -- Chief Clerk, Dept. of Ag., Nashville
 Brown, Mrs. Lillie H. -- Librarian, Nashville Public Library, Nashville
 Burke, Dr. Chas. B. -- Univ. of Tenn., Knoxville
 Burns, Inez -- Maryville
 Campbell, Dr. C. A. -- Maryville
 Campbell, Marie -- Inverness, Alabama
 Cantrell, J. B. -- Alpine
 Cartwright, Benjamin A. -- Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma
 Chambers, Catherine -- Gordonsville
 Cooper, Hugh B. -- 1311 Clay Street, Nashville

Cornwall, Ruby -- Hartsville
 Crabbe, Dr. A. L. -- Peabody College, Nashville
 Crawford, Dr. L. W. -- Peabody College, Nashville
 Crawford, Mrs. Milton Abby -- 508 Fortwood Place, Chattanooga
 Echols, Clara Dale -- Wendover above Hyden, Leslie Co., Kentucky
 Evins, S. C. -- Culleoka
 Farr, Dr. T. J. -- Tenn. Polytechnic Institute, Cookeville
 Fink, Paul M. -- Jonesboro
 Fite, D. Harley -- Austin Peay Normal, Clarksville
 Fogle, Oscar M. -- Pleasant Hill Academy, Pleasant Hill
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 Hunter, Dr. E. R. -- Maryville
 Hussey, Dr. George B. -- Maryville
 Jackson, Dr. George P. -- Vanderbilt Univ., Nashville
 Johnson, Freida -- Peabody College, Nashville
 Johnson, Jessie K. -- Maryville
 Jones, Mrs. Flora -- Alpine
 Jones, Rev. Robert W. -- Dixie Avenue, Cookeville
 Kennedy, R. M. -- Librarian, Univ. of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina
 Kirkland, Edwin C. -- Univ. of Tenn., Knoxville
 Klein, W. G. -- Alpine
 Lafrentz, Dr. F. W. -- 100 Broadway, New York City
 Lawson, Mrs. J. D. -- Granny White Road, Nashville
 McDowell, L. L. -- Smithville
 McDowell, Mrs. L. L. -- Smithville
 McGlasson, Cleo -- Cookeville
 McMullan, Lois -- 2105 $\frac{1}{2}$ Dixie Place, Nashville
 May, Hugh J. -- Double Springs
 Moore, Mrs. J. T. -- Algood
 Morgan, Dr. Arthur -- Yellow Springs, Ohio
 O'Dell, Mrs. J. L. -- Cookeville
 O'Dell, Mrs. Ruth -- Newport
 Owens, Bess Alice -- Pikeville Junior College, Pikeville, Kentucky
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 Rogers, E. G. -- Carthage
 Rothermel, Theona -- Pleasant Hill Academy, Pleasant Hill
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The Tennessee Folklore Society depends on the collection of the One dollar annual membership dues to print its Bulletin and carry on its program.

If you have not paid ~~your~~ 1939 dues, please send one dollar to Miss Geneva Anderson, Treasurer, Maryville, Tennessee.